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The Two Michael Joneses

BY FRANCES H. RELF, PH. D.

One of the familiar names in the early history of Illinois is *Michael Jones*. A man by that name was register of the land office at Kaskaskia from 1804 to 1822; a man by that name was candidate for United States senate in 1818 and again in 1819; a man by that name represented Gallatin County in the constitutional convention of 1818 and in the state senate from 1818 to 1826. Do all these activities belong to the same man? This question has never before been raised, for all secondary writers have taken it for granted that they did. Moses states in positive terms that the register of the Kaskaskia land office lived in Shawneetown "after 1814"; and that he, while State Senator, was a candidate for the United States Senate.¹ Going back a step farther to the contemporary writers, such as Reynolds, one finds nothing which shows that they were or were not the same man. But when one gets back to the contemporary records it becomes evident that the secondary writers are mistaken, and that there were two Michael Joneses, one living at Shawneetown, the other at Kaskaskia.

Considering the little information the writers had on this subject, it is not at all surprising that the mistake has been made. The lives of the two men dovetail most curiously; the political career of one was beginning at the same time as that of the other was ending, only during the winter of 1818-19 were they both in the lime-light? Their lives are two threads which the secondary writers have tangled together. By going back to the records it is possible to separate these threads and give to each man his due.

Up to the year that Illinois became a state the activities of each man were confined to his own side of the territory. The

Kaskaskia Michael Jones was born in Pennsylvania.² He was appointed register by the act of Congress of 1804 which established the land office at Kaskaskia. In 1810 he was appointed colonel of the militia of Randolph County.³ Though he held this office for less than a year, he was called by the title for the rest of his life. Any reference in the letters of the time to "Col. Jones," one may be sure, is to the register at Kaskaskia. He was removed from his office in the militia by Governor Edwards.⁴ From an early period of their acquaintance, there seems to have been ill feeling between these two men. They disagreed most decidedly over the settlement of the land claims.⁵ Many and involved had been the claims of the old French and early American settlers which had to be settled before any land could be sold. It was not, indeed, until 1814, ten years after the office was established, that sales began. Settlers who came in during that period were forced to be squatters on their land until they had the opportunity to buy. This raised a new complication, for these men claimed a prior right to the land they had improved. In recognition of this right Congress passed pre-emption laws applying especially to Illinois. The memorials sent by the Illinois territorial legislature to Congress would imply serious dissatisfaction with the way these laws were being carried out. But according to Jones this was not the motive; Edwards was using the legislature as his tool for getting the register out of office. On December 28th, 1814, Jones wrote to Meigs, the Commissioner of the General Land Office: "You will no doubt be presented with a memorial pass'd thro' the inadvertency of some members of the Legislature as penned by Ninian Edwards in which he inculpates me. This may have been done with a view of throwing between him and the Register the Legislature in order to give to his opinion long since express'd additional weight. From motives suited to his views he declared that my construction of the law was erroneous and oppressive.I cannot refrain from expressing my belief of his design to raise the indignation of the People against an officer for thus correctly and conscientiously discharging his duty.

.....The Memorial seems to be calculated to impress the Government with a state of Public feeling which does not in fact exist—and I trust my Government will not place too much confidence on information received thro' the medium of Gov. Edwards relating to myself."⁶

A year later the friction between the two men seems to have subsided for the register wrote then: "On Friday last the Legislature adjourned. They have forwarded six or seven memorials but none I believe that either effects me or my department nor can I learn that the Governor manifested any hostility towards me and the members were extremely friendly."⁷

This brings the career of the Kaskaskia register down to 1818 where one encounters the problem whether he or the Shawneetown lawyer was the candidate for United States senator.

The Shawneetown Michael Jones was a half-brother of Jesse B. Thomas, United States judge in Illinois during the whole of the territorial period.⁸ His relationship to Thomas makes it probable that he came to Lawrenceburg, Indiana at the same time—1803, and from the same state—Maryland.⁹ Shortly before leaving Lawrenceburg for Shawneetown in 1808 this Michael Jones was married to Mary C. James. Her father, John James, had brought his family from Frederick County, Maryland in 1807.¹⁰ From the names, THOMAS, JONES, JAMES, it is evident that they were all of Welsh descent. A few years later another daughter of John James married Jephtha Hardin, also a Shawneetown lawyer.¹¹ Richard T. Jones of Shawneetown, was a nephew of this Michael Jones.¹² Altogether there must have been a large family connection in the place. During the decade from 1808 to 1818, this young lawyer became one of the prominent men in Gallatin County. Judged by his land holdings, he was a man of means.¹³ As early as 1812 he was appointed a justice of the peace.¹⁴ Few petitions from Gallatin County citizens during that period, whether addressed to the territorial legislature¹⁵ or to Congress,¹⁶ are without his signature. In 1818, the

county showed its appreciation of his public spirit by electing him as their delegate to the constitutional convention, and later in the year as their senator to the state legislature.

There is little in these two accounts which is absolutely contradictory. It is possible to attribute most of the facts to the same man. Yet it is hardly reasonable that the register of the Kaskaskia land office should have moved over to Shawneetown in 1814. After that time all his official correspondence was still addressed to Kaskaskia,¹⁷ and he still continued to put "Kaskaskia" at the head of his own letters. Nor is it likely that the man who was so active in the local interests of Gallatin county was the man whose business interest was on the other side of the territory. In those days of slow travel, the two towns were much farther apart than they are now. More than that the signature of the register and the signature of the signer of the petitions are quite different. The former cannot be mistaken wherever found. It varies hardly at all. It was always written "*Michl. Jones*" with unusually long strokes of the pen for the "*M*," "*h*" and "*J*." The "*J*" extended as far below the line as above.¹⁸ It is the signature of a man who was accustomed to signing his name frequently. The other signature is always found with the "Michael" written out in full and with the "*J*" written entirely above the line like a modern "*I*."¹⁹ There is more variety in the formation of the letters as is frequently the case with men who do not sign their names often.

When the first General Assembly of the State of Illinois met in October 1818, one of its first duties was the election of two United States senators. Michael Jones was one of the six candidates.²⁰ According to the *Illinois Emigrant*²¹ the newspaper printed in Shawneetown, the candidate was the Michael Jones "of Kaskaskia." This paper, by the way it reported the results of the election, gives positive evidence that there was more than one man by that name, who might be supposed to be the candidate. "*Michael Jones*" is the only name in the list after whose name was put in parenthe-

sis his place of residence. The editor of the paper no doubt wished his readers to understand that the candidate was not their own familiarly known state senator, but a man by the same name from the other side of the state. The Kaskaskia paper contains no such explanatory phrase. There was no need for it there for the Shawneetown lawyer was a very new man in state-wide politics; no one in Kaskaskia would associate with the name "*Michael Jones*" any but their own well-known register.

The candidates elected were Ninian Edwards and Jesse B. Thomas. Edwards drew the short term and was up again for election the following February. This time Michael Jones was his only opponent. That it was again the Kaskaskia man there can be no doubt for the land claims were made an issue in the campaign.²² Jones received nineteen votes to Edwards twenty-three.²³ But this cannot be taken as an indication of Jones's strength with the legislators. The effort was to defeat Edwards rather than to elect Jones. This is evident from the attempt that was made just previous to the election to divide the state into two electoral districts, an east and a west.²⁴ Thomas lived in the western part so if the measure had gone through the new senator would have to have been a man from the eastern side of the state. This would have eliminated Edwards who was living in Edwardsville, Madison County,²⁵ but it would have eliminated also the register of the Kaskaskia land office.

These two efforts to become United States senator seem to have been the register's only attempt to obtain office from the people of Illinois. He probably was not popular. Though Reynolds describes him as having been "a sprightly man of plausible and pleasing address," yet he adds: "His temperament was very excitable and rather irritable. His mind was above the ordinary range; but his passion at times swept over it like a tornado." According to Reynolds these failings increased as he grew older.²⁶ In 1822 he died. The account of his death is given in a letter from the receiver of the Kaskaskia office to the commissioner of the general land office

written from Kaskaskia, November 30th, 1822. "It is with sensations of the most poignant regret and sorrow," wrote the receiver, "that I discharge the painful duty of announcing the death of my inestimable friend and worthy colleague Col. Mich. Jones, Regr. of the Land office at this place. He departed this life on Tuesday, the 26th instant after a painful and lingering illness of some months."²⁷

This indisputable evidence of the death of the register of the Kaskaskia land office, as early as 1822 removes any doubt that might remain as to whether there was a second man by the same name living in the state. It was after that year that the Shawneetown lawyer became such a power in Illinois politics. But it is not needful to follow his career. After the death of the Kaskaskia man, he had the stage to himself. There are no more threads to untangle.

NOTES.

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- 1 Moses, *Illinois Historical and Statistical*, 1: 272, 298. See also *The Bench and Bar of Illinois* (Chicago, 1899), 2: 852; and Bateman and Selby, *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois* (1915).
- 2 Reynolds, *Pioneer History of Illinois* (2nd ed.), 352.
- 3 *Territorial Records* (Pub. I. S. H. L. 1901), 14.
- 4 *Ib.*, 18.
- 5 Reynolds, *Pioneer History of Illinois*, 352.
- 6 Kaskaskia Land Office. *Copies of Letters transmitted by the Register, 1814-1830* (Auditor's Office, Springfield).
- 7 *Ib.* Jones to Rufus Easton, Jan. 15, 1816.
- 8 *Illinois Gazette*; Aug. 5, 1826, p. 3.
- 9 Bateman and Selby, *Biographical Encyclopedia of Illinois* (1915).
- 10 *Bench and Bar*, 2: 852.
- 11 *Ib.*
- 12 *Illinois Gazette*, Aug. 5, 1826, p. 3.
- 13 Shawneetown Land Office, *Applications and Withdrawals, 1824-28*, (Auditor's Office, Springfield).
- 14 *Territorial Records*, 28.
- 15 *Edwards Papers*, 71-78; Assembly Misc. Papers, 1813-1832 (Secretary of State's Office, Springfield).
- 16 House Files, Feb. 22, 1816, Mch. 11, 1816, Dec. 24, 1816.
- 17 Kaskaskia Land Office. *Letters received 1814-16*.
- 18 *Ib.* Cahokia cases, certificates; House Files, Mch. 14, 1818.
- 19 Besides the House Files see Shawneetown Land Office, *Applications and withdrawals, 1814-18*.
- 20 *Journal of the Senate of the first session of the First General Assembly*, 17, Kaskaskia, 1818.
- 21 Oct. 17, 1818, p. 2.
- 22 *Edwards Papers*, 153-55. Thomas Cox to Edwards, Feb. 8, 1819.
- 23 *Journal of the Senate of the second session of the General Assembly of the State of Illinois* (Kaskaskia 1819), 49.
- 24 *Edwards Papers*, 149. Daniel P. Cook to Edwards, Feb. 2, 1819.
- 25 Census of 1818 (Office of the Secretary of State, Springfield).
- 26 *Pioneer History*, 352.
- 27 Kaskaskia Land Office, *Receiver's letter book, 1820-29*.